

Testimony in support of H7914: Natural Forest Protection Act

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Date of Hearing: March 31, 2026

To: Chair Bennett and Members of the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee:

I submit testimony in strong support of the Natural Forest Protection Act H 7914. This act would create the first state law to protect public forests in Rhode Island. Such legislation is essential and very urgent to safeguard our disappearing public forests and old growth heritage trees. The legislation would also provide much needed “guardrails” against the relentless pressures from the forest and timber industries to “harvest” our precious last remaining RI public forests and large heritage trees.

During recent visits to the Great Swamp Management Area, I observed areas of cleared forests and the decimation of large old trees. The forest areas that were cleared (and the large trees that were removed) were not near any roadways, walking paths, powerlines, or any other manmade structures. The timber from these trees was completely removed, but the forest floor was severely damaged from tree removal machinery. This is very strange, and leads one to believe that the trees were removed for harvesting (timber removal for profit?). It is nearly impossible to ascertain the factual reasons why these areas were cleared, and herein lies one of the main problems of not having a law to protect and safeguard our RI public forests. H 7914 is the answer to this problem.

I also visited an area in the Acadia Management Area that was clearcut. There were representatives from DEM, RI legislators, a private logger, private forest scientists, arborists, and many concerned RI residents all at the site at the same time. The debate with these different stakeholders on what happened and why this area was cut down went on for hours. What I saw was acres of cleared forest, and huge amounts of wood slash (dry, flammable wood debris) left all around the ground. Evidence of decimation to the forest floor from large forestry equipment was also observed. It was nearly impossible to ascertain the factual reasons why this area was cleared. H 7914 is the answer to this problem and will lead to better communications and collaborations with diverse stakeholders.

RI residents are not aware of the active logging activities happening across the state on public lands. Each time I mention the situation to a RI resident, the response I hear from them is the same, *“I never knew this was happening in RI, it much be stopped”*. The unchecked harvesting of RI public forests and old growth trees is accelerating and without H 7914, the last remaining public forests and large trees don’t stand a chance of survival. This is not hyper-boil, but backed up by forest experts and scientists not connected to the timber industry or RI DEM.

RI is the most densely populated state in the country behind NJ. We don't need a timber industry in RI, we don't want harvesting of our public forests and trees. RI is not Canada or the Western US, where harvesting wood for profit is the norm and sustainably certified. RI residents, wildlife and the biodiversity that still exists in our RI intact forests need the forest for survival. H 7914 is not a zero-cutting act, but a means to restore balance to the current state of cut/harvest first, and ask for forgiveness later. The current practices of harvesting RI public forests are not acceptable to RI residents, or the natural world. The current RI Forestry on Public Lands process lacks transparency and oversight from experts not employed by or contracted with RI government.

Rhode Island is currently the only state in New England with no protected Wildlands on public land - which are forests protected in their natural state from logging. H 7914 would protect our remaining RI public forests, old growth trees, and rare habitats on public state land through the creation of the Natural Area Preserves listed in the bill. Old Growth Forests and old mature forests are exceptionally rare in Rhode Island, with only 1% of the state's forests being over 100 years old. Guess what? These Old Growth Forests have a higher degree of native biodiversity, almost no invasives (plant or insect), and are much more resistant to wildfires.

H 7914 would also protect our public state forests from deforestation and natural habitat destruction through the provisions prohibiting clearcutting and other destructive logging practices on state-owned land, as well as, requiring environmental review before public state logging operations are approved. This is exactly the type of "balance" between RI government (DEM) and public expert oversight that we need in RI. The current state of public land forestry in RI is not working and needs to be corrected. H 7914 will help restore such balance.

Lastly, H 7914 will bring back the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program after a 19-year absence. His program will help identify, monitor, and protect native biodiversity, including rare and endangered species across Rhode Island. This program would also allow for native biodiversity to become more of a priority in our state.

Please pass the Natural Forest Protection Act H 7914. Please help current and future generations of Rhode Islanders enjoy the natural wonders and vast importance of undisturbed RI public forests and large old growth heritage trees.

Thank you very much for considering my input, and thank you to Representative Shanley for introducing this important bill.

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